

Coach Dag's White and Blue Army: A Season of Berkeley Volleyball

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by Mark E. Hayes

PRESEASON - "WE'LL SEE IF WE BECOME A GREAT TEAM"

The smash might have loosened a few of Sarah Pickett's teeth, but as far as she could tell, everything was still there.

In a free moment between drills Pickett, a senior, walked over to junior Yoshiko Ozawa and curled back her lips to show her teeth. "Do you shee anyshing 'ong wish 'y teesh?"

Earlier in volleyball practice Pickett took a hard spike full in the mouth, and now, even half an hour later, she's just making sure that everything's in working order.

The spike came from one of her best friends on the team, senior Jessica Riester, the Bucs powerful and athletic outside hitter, who had already committed to play for perennial college volleyball power Florida after the end of last year's season.

Also at the end of last year's season, the Berkeley Buccaneer volleyball team won the state 3A championship, its ninth title in 15 years.

This fall, the Bucs returned five starters to their championship squad--all but Melissa Conrad, now at the College of William and Mary. Rejoining Riester in defense of the title were the cool and collected setter Anna Robinson, one of 18 high school players on the 1998 USA Volleyball Youth National team, junior Delavane Diaz, boisterous senior Ashley Axson, senior Quinn Porter, Pickett, Ozawa, juniors Jennifer Gilette, Crystal Shannon, Laura Murfee, junior exchange student Paola Paoli, sophomore Lindsey Rychman, and freshman Hillary Parsons.

Expectations remained understandably high for the team, coached by Randy Dagostino--"Dag" as he's known to most--the architect of the nine previous titles. The Bucs came into the season ranked as the 1st place 3A team in the state and, according to Student Sports, the 8th team in the county. Despite all this preseason hype, a coach with a decade-and-a-half of success like Dagostino can set an even higher standard for his players.

"We have weaknesses we have to improve on, but we are a really solid team," Dagostino told the Tampa Tribune. "Right now I'm going to say we are a good team. We'll see if we become a great team."

Like many of the players, Pickett said the expectations of the program matter as much, if not more, than any external pressures. "To be the best team ever is the ultimate goal," she said. "You have to distinguish yourselves from those nine other teams."

The Bucs set goals for the season, and the highlights followed something like this: be undefeated all season long, be undefeated outside the state of Florida, win the tough Durango Invitational Tournament in Las Vegas, be undefeated inside the state of Florida, win the state 3A championship.

Above and beyond Dag's regular and rigorous two-hour practices during the Florida high school volleyball season, most of the Bucs players are members of club volleyball teams during much of the remainder of the year. For many high-caliber athletic programs in the state--not just in volleyball but swimming, soccer, and baseball--club sports are a necessary fact of survival. Many of Dag's Berkeley Bucs also play for him on the Tampa Bay Juniors Volleyball Club; Dag's wife, Lauri, is the assistant commissioner for the Florida region of USA Volleyball which does much of the organizing for these clubs teams and tournaments. Berkeley volleyball is very much a way of life for Dag and his circle.

For much of the preseason, the Bucs had to practice at Tampa Prep because Berkeley's Dimmitt Gymnasium spent the summer being transformed into the Berkeley Athletic Complex--one part of the which, Johnson Fieldhouse, will be used for volleyball. Dimmitt Gym is ready enough to practice in, but the fieldhouse isn't finished.

"It'll be like the Taj Mahal once we get in there," Dag said in August.

During the regular season, the Bucs are often their own best competition, and the scrimmages in practice sometimes provided the best-played volleyball the girls would see in a given week. The players push each other, Dag and assistant coaches Marianne Rechteris and John Coup are constantly pushing all the players in the program. For the varsity players, the national and state rankings and the expectations for a championship are in the backs of everyone's minds, but the team has higher aspirations: to succeed on their own terms and to set even higher standards for the teams to come.

During the preseason and from time to time during the regular season, the Bucs were assisted in practices by Eileen Murfee, an All-American out of Berkeley in 1992, a national champ with Stanford, and a member for a time of the USA national team in 1997. Eileen's younger sister Laura is a junior on the team and her father Lee is a science teacher in Berkeley's upper division.

The players speak very highly of Eileen Murfee, a link to the great Berkeley teams of the past. Murfee joined the team for a number of practices before the start of the regular season.

"She showed us we could work harder than we did," said Ashley Axson. "She can deal with us: she's a girl, she's young. She'll give us ways to deal with Dag."

"She's always saying how much nicer Dag is now compared to when she was playing," said Sarah Pickett.

"It's just such an inspiration," said Delavane Diaz. "She knows so much about the game. I love just talking to her."

Murfee gave each player a little plastic scorpion to remind them of how to play always at the top of their game, and those scorpions hung from many bags throughout the season. The scorpion always attacks its victim the same way no matter how unimportant they may be. This, Murfee said, was the way they needed to feel about their opponents.

FIRST GAME - DETHRONING THE MAKEUP QUEEN

Alex Sevillano, star of the Clearwater Tornadoes volleyball team, last year's undefeated 5A champion at 32-0, is a darling of the press. She is photogenic and articulate and has an interesting personal history. The newspapers in Pinellas county seemed to run at least one story a month about Sevillano during the course of the season.

As if there weren't enough pressure already, on the first day of classes at Berkeley, the Bucs had their first game against Clearwater.

Dagostino said that Sevillano is a world-class athlete, a nationally-ranked synchronized swimmer who would probably be a success at virtually any sport she tried.

His reason for scheduling this match was clear: to see how the Bucs would match up against the best team from the highest classification in the state, a team ranked fifth in the nation at the end of last year and 14th in the nation in the preseason.

The Bucs players had a healthy respect for Sevillano's abilities and athleticism, although one Berkeley player playfully referred to her as The Makeup Queen. Fame has its price.

Playing to a sizeable crowd in Dimmitt Gymnasium but without hitter Jessica Riester, whose knee was injured, the Bucs lost the first game of the season 10-15. In between the first and

second matches some Berkeley fans went through a few runs of the cheer "Coach Dag's White and Blue Army," and "We've got strength, we've got power, we've got Yoshiko Ozawa." Over the course of the season, many of them will come to matches dressed as pirates or carrying noisemakers or cards reading "ACE" or "KILL."

In the second game the Tornadoes went up 9-5 before Anna Robinson served three consecutive points to rally the Bucs, who won 15-10. The third game remained close until 7-7, when Berkeley ran off seven points on Jen Gillette serves, then sealed the match to win 15-7. Many of the Bucs fans ran onto the court to congratulate the players. Many of them were guys. Any excuse to hug the girls.

Two nights later the Bucs defeated Winter Springs, a 3A team from Orlando. Enthusiastic Bucs fans were asked to be quiet while the other team was serving. Paul Dolciomascolo, a truly loyal fan of the team who attended every home match, had his air horn confiscated. Those darned volleyball fans!

The regular season was underway.

FRAGMENTS - KAYLA JOINS THE TEAM, CHICKAPAW AND DURCHALTEWILLE

Kayla Mora appeared to be trying to enjoy practice that afternoon.

Because Sarah Pickett sustained a knee injury that would take some time to heal, Dagostino moved Kayla, a ninth-grader already six feet tall, up to varsity from the JV squad. For anyone suddenly moved to the next level as Kayla had been--that very day, in fact--adjusting to the speed and power and precision of practice is difficult. No one who understands this adjustment would envy her. She was doing her best to keep up with the drills, to get to know the other players and her new coach.

Kayla set her face, stepped up in line, and jumped into a drill with Anna Robinson setting balls for shots. Kayla moved to the net and got off a decent shot.

Dag told Kayla to call for her shot--to name the location above the net where she would like the ball placed from Anna: three, four, two, one, six, eight, slide. Kayla nodded.

"Call for your shot, call for your shot," said Dag. "Didn't you know that Anna is deaf in one ear? Isn't that right, Anna?"

Anna, setting for a player on the other end of the net, wasn't listening. "What?" she said.

"That's right," Dag continued. "Deaf in one ear and blind in the other."

Anna shrugged and calmly set another ball, one of a zillion she will probably set in her life. Kayla gave a small smile: Oh, a joke. Then she headed for the back of the line. She would be okay.

Dagostino was in good spirits this mid-September afternoon, chatting and joking with his players, keeping drills moving quickly and with just the right degree of difficulty. His players were working with intensity and effort; Dimmitt Gymnasium was noisy, busy; this was how the good teams win season after season: practicing, and practicing well.

Over the months of Berkeley and Tampa Bay Juniors volleyball, the players have developed a few rituals to help alleviate the sometime boring routine of warming up.

For instance, the oddest ritual, referred to as "Chikapaw," involves girls standing in a circle and hopping up and down, chanting "chikapaw-chikapaw-chikapaw-chicka-paw-paw" while holding their arms in the air and making what can only be described as quotation-mark gestures with their fingers. It looks silly; it probably is silly; it is better than jumping jacks.

Jessica Riester said the team learned about Chickapaw while touring Europe on a club trip. The team picked up its T-shirt slogan there as well. On the backs on the Berkeley volleyball shirts is the saying, Disziplin, Durchaltewille hate Arteite sind die Schulssel fur unseren Erfolg. It doesn't exactly roll off the tongue, but it means well and is loosely translated as, "Discipline, determination, and hard work are the keys to our success."

Often during those long weekend tournaments when the team has to kill time between matches, they have wheelbarrow or leapfrog races or play steamroller or Crystal Shannon--who has far too much energy for any one human being--leads the team in aerobics. They play at most of these games with the same enthusiasm with which they practice.

THE SEASON - "...THE STRONGEST POSSIBLE SCHEDULE"

For players, it is a grueling task to balance volleyball and the rest of their lives. Berkeley's academics are demanding, but so are the long hours of practice, the travel from game to game, and the Fridays and Saturdays devoted to tournaments. The season runs from August to November, almost the entire first semester, with few breaks and very little time for anything but schoolwork and sports.

The Bucs finished the regular season at 24-6, winning 80 percent of the matches on a schedule that Dagostino went out of his way to make difficult. Dag arranged for the Bucs to play a non-district schedule this year so his team could face more consistently tough competition from around the state and the nation.

"We are not breaking any rules, we are just exercising our right not to play a district schedule," Dag told the Tampa Tribune. "I can't be faulted for trying to put together the strongest possible schedule."

The focus of most weeks for the Bucs were the tournaments on the weekends, and no tournament was more important to the team than the Durango Classic in Las Vegas, which each year bring together 16 of the top high school teams from around the country. Berkeley is often the only team east of the Mississippi to participate.

This year, Berkeley came in as the #1 seed, but flew home after three wins and three losses and a 12th place finish in the tournament. Even before Durango, Dag is reportedly more than a little superstitious about being the top seed in any tournament.

Like many of her teammates, Delavane Diaz, even after the season was well over, remained disappointed with the result from Las Vegas. She said she felt that Berkeley had lost a chance to really establish itself as a national team.

One more loss came against Venice, two more against Olympic Heights. Generally, most of the Bucs matches ended in Berkeley victories and weekend tournaments finished with Berkeley coming out on top. Despite all the successes of the season, the team became genuinely frustrated with the few losses. The high goals of the preseason seemed to be slipping away.

In early October, for instance, the Berkeley campus hosted the Berkeley Premier Tournament for 11 other teams, and for one weekend the sports complex was literally overflowing with volleyball. With three matches going simultaneously and six others waiting to play, it was a crowded scene. Despite the home fans and familiar surroundings, the Bucs dropped two out of five matches at this tournament and finished sixth overall. The Bucs arch rival Tampa Preparatory won the tournament.

Next week, Berkeley got even. On the following Tuesday, the Bucs beat the Tampa Prep Terps 15-4, 15-13.

"I thought this weekend we had the toughest schedule in our own tournament," Dag told the St. Petersburg Times. "Our regular season schedule has also been extremely demanding. We needed a break, so Monday I gave them the day off and just talked to each player individually about the mental game. I think it paid off."

After matches, Dag's players said he is always ready to provide a critical but fair evaluation of the team and individual performances. He looks for a way to improve; he looks to the next season and to the season after that.

"You're used to it," said Jessica Riester. "You're used to him pushing you. But in the end, what matters is how hard you can push yourself."

Jen Gillette said she sometimes dreads being singled out in post-game or practice meetings, "But when he tells you that you finally did it, it's great" she adds.

Many of the players said that some of their non-volleyball friends don't always understand their level of commitment. "They can't realize how much time and energy we put into it," said Jessica. "They see what we do with Dag and they wonder how we can put that much of ourselves into something for someone else, but they have to understand that we're really doing it for ourselves."

It is fun to win and it is fun to be this good at something this difficult. They live, for better or for worse, in their own special volleyball universe.

"We all work hard and we all know what we're getting into," said Jen Gillette.

The players speak highly of Dag in his more informal moments on the road and outside of practice and competition. This year in Las Vegas, the team spent time touring the city and taking pictures. Several players seemed amused that their coach insisted on going on one of the new roller coasters in Vegas.

"Dag loves roller coasters," said Jessica. "If we're near a roller coaster, he has to go on it."

THE CHAMPIONSHIP- SIX DOZEN SCREAMING PREPPIES CAN'T BE WRONG

Coach Dagostino's team reached the playoffs ready for a run at its second straight title, Berkeley's tenth in volleyball. For the most part, the team was fine-tuned and focused and encountered little opposition all the way to the state final. If anything, the playoffs were a bit of an anticlimax. For several games of some early round matches, Dag had the luxury of starting his second team or of tinkering with lineups for next year. A number of the junior varsity players tagged along with the team during playoffs, partly to help with managerial-type duties and partly to get a glimpse of varsity life.

Some elements of the playoffs are different than the regular season: most obvious is the presence of the Florida High School Athletic Association. There are more FHSAA officials working the matches; FHSAA admission prices are charged at the door; corporations like Dodge and Gatorade actually sponsor the FHSAA finals. Parents bring more video cameras. Sometimes more fans show up. Sometimes the national anthem is sung before matches.

In Districts at the Academy of Holy Names in Tampa the players talked before their match about what it might be like to go to a school with no boys and with a uniform consisting of a blue smock. Then they went out and beat the St. Pete Catholic Barons 15-3, 15-10. In the District Final two days later the Bucs beat Clearwater Central Catholic in two games.

On Election Day, in the regional quarterfinals at Berkeley in front of a passionate home crowd, the Bucs, playing their bench in the second game, strung out a match against Frostproof

to three games, 15-3, 12-15, 15-0. Matt Winn led the crowd in its usual noisy business and fans held up signs reading: ANNA. FEAR. ENOUGH SAID. and REISTER IS A BEASTER and INSANE DELAVANE COMING TO INFLICT SOME PAIN. No other volleyball team in the state had fans like that. By the time it was over Jeb Bush had been declared governor.

That weekend, in the regional semifinal at Cardinal Mooney in Sarasota, the Bucs defeated the host team 15-10, 15-0, but experienced an anxious moment when Ashley Axson sprained her ankle. Axson sat out the second match of the day, the regional final against Pine Crest.

The Bucs won that first game 15-8. In the second game against Pine Crest, with his team struggling a little, Dag began to get a little irritated; at 11-7, he called time out and said very plainly, "We're getting this next point right here." His team did get the next point, then went on to win the second game 15-7.

"We have one more week!" he shouted when it was over. In truth, Pine Crest might have been the toughest competition for the Bucs.

On Friday of the following week, Berkeley sent two busloads of students to the state semifinal at the mammoth George Jenkins High School in Lakeland. The Berkeley fans, still for the most part in their Friday uniforms, looked self-consciously preppie as they disembarked from the Astro-skate buses (one of which, by the way, was fuschia). In the gymnasium, in their white and blue oxford shirts, grey pants and skirts and painted faces and giant blue fingers, the hundred or so Berkeley fans formed a well-defined cheering section. The volleyball team was clearly thrilled to have the support.

But, the average fan loves an underdog, and the Berkeley powerhouse with its clean-cut cheering section quickly drove the house to the side of Williston, today's opponent, with a record of 30-7. It was over in 30 minutes. With most of the crowd on their side, the Williston Red Devils went down 15-4 and 15-1. Axson's ankle was tender, but she managed a team-high six kills and five blocks. The Bucs were going to the state final, and their fans were going back on the buses and back to classes. It was a rather short outing.

One Williston player said, "We knew what we were getting ourselves into, but man they were good."

The state final on Saturday was much the same. Berkeley had already beaten the Melbourne Central Catholic Hustlers 15-7, 15-2, but Dag was reserved and humble about the prospect of winning. There was little doubt about the direction the match would take, with Berkeley winning 15-5, 15-6. Ashley Axson led the team with seven kills and four blocks; Anna Robinson had 15 assists. The final point was scored by Jessica Reister on a smart play rather than a power play: knowing the other team would be ready to receive a smash from her, she lightly tipped the ball over the net where it fell between two MCC players.

Berkeley Preparatory School had won its 10th state title in volleyball and its second straight, compiling an overall season record of 29-6. Along the way, they beat every other state champion for the year in all other classifications: Bayshore Christian, Tampa Prep, Cardinal Gibbons, Venice and Olympic Heights. They improved Berkeley's overall record to 42-1 in state tournament play.

Afterwards, amid the flowers and medals, the hugs and snapshots, Coach Dagostino gave his players another victory: they had won him over.

"They rank right up there with the other teams," Dag said for everyone. "I can say it now: This is a great team."

EPILOGUE - WAIT UNTIL NEXT YEAR

The players returned to regular life and a few weeks of classes before semester exams. Then, in January, many of them started club volleyball all over again.

The seniors will move on after graduation. Senior captain Jessica Riester with 266 kills and 33 aces, was named to the All-State first team for 3A and will attend Florida in the fall on a scholarship. Ashley Axson, who finished the season with 156 kills and led Hillsborough County with 149 blocks, was named to the All-State second team and will attend Virginia Tech on scholarship. Quinn Porter will attend North Carolina to play softball, her first sport, on scholarship. Sarah Pickett's knee has healed and she is making her own plans for college.

Junior Yohsiko Ozawa was named to the All-State second team and is a bright star for the Berkeley girls' basketball team. Delavane Diaz, who led the Bucs with 267 kills and had 171 digs on defense, was named to All-State first team and is hard at work for the Tampa Bay Juniors.

Junior captain Anna Robinson was named All-State first team, Player of the Year by both the Tampa Tribune and the St. Petersburg Times, and recieved a Gatorade Circle of Champions High School Player of the Year for the Southeast region of the U.S. She set a school record for assists with 791 and racked up 100 kills as well. The odds are good she'll end up on a U.S national team again. For now, like Delavane, Anna, Yoshi and all the rest are back with Dag in club volleyball.

Delavane seemed the most determined to keep the championship streak going next year. Of course, her sights are set a little higher than most.

She wants to go back to Las Vegas as a senior:

"I'll still have one more shot at it."